

**Interview with Gilbert Christiana  
conducted by Sue Kovach Shuman for the  
Providence District History Project Providence Perspective**

**Sue:** We are talking to Gilbert Christiana.

**Gil:** Yes.

**Sue:** of Oakton for the Providence Perspective History Project and it's July 16<sup>th</sup>, 2010. I am Sue Shuman and also here with us is Linda Byrne.

**Sue:** We would like to speak to you a little bit because you are a longtime resident of Providence District. Ah, can you tell me – I know you wrote you were born in New York City – when did you move to this area and what brought you here?

**Gil:** In 1957 I at the time was employed by the Federal Aviation Administration in New York; and there was an opportunity for advancement in the area here so I put an application in for a position and got it. This is the headquarters office so if you stay with the organization you don't go any higher than this.

**Sue:** You started out working with what is now J.F.K. Airport

**Gil:** Yes.

**Sue:** And when we spoke yesterday briefly you said there was another name for it

**Gil:** It used to be called Idlewild

**Sue:** Okay, so before then.

**Gil:** That was a long time ago.

**Linda:** I remember it back then. Yes.

**Sue:** And the F.A.A. was not the F.A.A. it was the Department of Commerce.

**Gil:** That's right.

**Sue:** 1957 it changed.

**Gil:** Yeah.

**Sue:** Okay. And you were with – you have an Electrical Engineering Master's degree yes?

**Gil:** No, engineering I have a Bachelor's Degree and I have a Master's in education.

**Sue:** Okay. So tell us a little bit, that we know what brought you here, what in this area has kept you here besides the job; when you retired as you say for the third and last time at age 70 what kept you here?

**Gil:** Well one thing is I've been here so long this is home.

**Sue:** Define home; what's good about home.

**Gil:** It's a place you like living, living in... and there are all kinds of opportunities for self-expression, for entertainment for work if you are inclined to any more.

**Sue:** Tell us a little about the self-expression – you showed us the beautiful watercolor that you do. And you are involved with the Vienna Art League is it?

**Gil:** Vienna Art Society. I'm not active in it anymore but I am still a member. I would guess that I was a member for oh maybe fifteen years total. And I spent about 8 of those years as treasurer. And finally I decided that I wanted to spend more time painting then working on administrative things.

**Sue:** Are you a self-taught painter, have you ever had a lesson?

**Gil:** I've had lessons but not the kind of lessons you would get if you were an art major in school. I took workshops; one week workshops in various places in the Country, in the World.

**Sue:** Have you been painting most of your life?

**Gil:** No, twelve, fifteen years.

**Linda:** And you and your wife travel to some interesting places while you take those workshops.

**Gil:** We did, there were a few trips overseas that were exclusively for that purpose. But in connection with the, ah my last employment I traveled all over the world on business. And my business took me to various places never less than two weeks sometimes three weeks. My wife came with me and we parlayed that trip into a vacation. We'd add a couple of weeks for ourselves.

**Gil:** The countries were mostly in the civilized world let's put it that way: Britain, France and Italy.

**Sue:** But you enjoyed doing this whenever you could.

**Gil:** Whenever I could yes.

**Sue:** Okay. Um now you provided a biography that says you live in Oakton and now you pursue less demanding activities such as water color painting, gardening, reading, and serving as secretary on the board of directors of the community. Tell us about your community a little bit about the community association, what was it like when you first moved to that area?

**Gil:** To this where I live now?

**Sue:** Yes, is this the same place Oakton Manor?

**Gil:** Well I've been in Oakton Manor for I guess about twenty years.

**Sue:** You said thirty nine townhomes were built in the 1970's and that's where you've lived since the 1970's?

**Linda:** Yes.

**Gil:** No.

**Linda:** Oh.

**Gil:** About twenty years, yeah I guess that's right.

**Sue:** Okay.

**Linda:** Almost, but you lived prior to that?

**Gil:** When we moved to this area we lived in, well I think I listed them in sequence.

**Sue:** Arlington.

**Gil:** Arlington

**Sue:** Falls Church.

**Gil:** Falls Church.

**Sue:** Vienna and now Oakton.

**Gil:** Right.

**Sue:** What's the best thing about your neighborhood, besides the neighbors like Linda?

**Gil:** The best thing about it is it's isolated pretty much from the busy world that's outside the confines and we have rigorous rules for maintaining the homes. They are all painted at the same time in the same way. We have services like trash collection, yard work and gardening.

**Sue:** So the upkeep and the way it looks are very important to you.

**Gil:** Yeah.

**Sue:** The landscaping and such, okay.

**Linda:** Plus it's convenient too. You have the shopping center.

**Gil:** If you don't get lost it's convenient.

All laughing.

**Sue:** Since you got lost on the way here today, yes. Okay, tell me a little bit about the things you have been involved in like board of directors of the community and the Vienna Art League what kind of contributions on the community level as a citizen have you made besides making sure that perhaps the architectural maintenance review board doesn't fall down on its covenants or something.

**Gil:** I don't know that there was much else because those two jobs kept me pretty busy still do.

**Sue:** Um hum. So tell us a little about what you do, so they still keep you busy.

**Gil:** I'm secretary so I attend all the meetings. We have 7 board members and I've been a board member for about twenty years; and I guess I I've been secretary for the same length of time; getting tired of it. It's not terribly demanding but I'm getting older and slower.

**Sue:** What do you think your neighbors would say about you? Describe a couple of adjectives or nouns that they would say about you.

**Gil:** Well most of the reports I get unsolicited are pleasant ones. I think if I stop serving as a board member I would make some people pretty unhappy. They seem to be pleased with my work. I know just about – because I am secretary I know just about everybody in the community and we all get along quite well.

**Sue:** How large is the community in number of homes.

**Gil:** Thirty eight homes.

**Sue:** It is just thirty eight so it's a very neighborly small area. And you said it's removed enough from the congestion, the traffic and the noise. Tell me when you first came to the area what it was like when you first moved here.

**Gil:** When I lived in Falls Church and we'd come out to Vienna on the weekend for a drive in the country.

**Linda:** Wow.

**Sue:** And that's not that many miles wow. So what was Vienna like then if it was the country?

**Gil:** It was just smaller, quieter and more pleasant. Now it's teeming with automobiles.

**Sue:** Were there farms?

**Gil:** Yeah there were farms, not in the city town proper but yeah there were farms. Um the traffic was much lighter which made it more pleasant in some respects. It's also nice to have so much available outside of this little perimeter that we live within.

**Sue:** That's very close to you

**Gil:** You can get about anything you want without going terribly far which is helpful when you get older.

**Sue:** It's always helpful at any age. Do you have children?

**Gil:** I have one daughter.

**Sue:** So your daughter went to public school in this area.

**Gil:** She did but no not in this area. Let me think a second. My daughter is sixty one years old, I think is the right number.

**Sue:** You must have had her late.

**Gil:** I was a child groom.

**Sue:** Could have been.

**Gil:** She's a psychologist has a practice in Vienna and getting on in years now and she's looking in fact she's beginning to back off a little bit from the intensity of daily contact with people that have problems. I think right now this summer she started just a few days ago, I don't know how long it will last but, the three day week. She has an office right across the street from the Amphora.

**Sue:** Oh.

**Gil:** Right across the street from the Amphora.

**Sue:** I know that area well. But she has stayed in this area because it's a good area to live in and

**Gil:** Yeah. She lives in our old house.

**Sue:** Oh, so your daughter.

**Gil:** We had a house in Vienna.

**Sue:** And that's where she now lives.

**Gil:** She, yeah, we moved her in and we moved out.

**Sue:** Okay, did you move just because of the smaller house larger house downsizing?

**Gil:** We were downsizing.

**Sue:** Downsizing okay.

**Gil:** We had, I guess we had the better part of an acre and it was us and a couple of cats with a four bedroom house and a three car garage and you know you don't need all that stuff.

**Sue:** The acre was a lot of work. Now you still do gardening so

**Gil:** Yeah I do but on a much smaller scale.

**Sue:** Did you have a vegetable garden before when you had the acre?

**Gil:** I did yeah.

**Sue:** Do you have one now?

**Gil:** Not really.

**Sue:** Okay.

**Gil:** We grow flowers now.

**Sue:** Well you still grow something that sounds good. What do you like to read? You mentioned this is one of the things you do now.

**Gil:** I use to like to read and I still do thrillers by some of the better authors.

**Sue:** Tom Clancy type.

**Gil:** Yeah that sort of thing. But lately for the last year or two I've been smitten with Civil War history.

**Sue:** Are you doing anything because of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year? This is

**Gil:** Abraham Lincoln?

**Sue:** No, the Civil War commemorative anniversary.

**Gil:** Well this is also Abe Lincoln's year I think.

**Linda:** Is it? Oh.

**Gil:** Let me see who is coming out with a I saw something just the other day. Well there have been a lot of books in recent months on Lincoln.

**Sue:** Yes.

**Gil:** A whole series of books. I am fascinated with how much we could do in those days with so little.

**Sue:** Such as; what kind of example?

**Gil:** Well he didn't have a cabinet with forty people sitting around a table. He was self schooled for the most part. And he did an awful lot with an awful little.

**Sue:** what could we learn from that?

**Gil:** Well volume doesn't make up for smarts. He was very, very shrewd, a very shrewd politician.

**Sue:** You're saying shrewd as in a good sense of the word.



**Gil:** Yeah.

**Sue:** So okay, it could be either.

**Gil:** He was a smart politician. Yeah, I just think where he came from and where he got to.

**Linda:** I remember reading the book in high school called Love is Eternal and it was about Abe Lincoln and his family and the title of the book was taken from the inside of their wedding rings that was inscribed in there Love is Eternal.

**Gil:** I hadn't heard that one.

**Sue:** Let's back up a little bit we were discussing things and the Civil War, you actually were in World War II.

**Gil:** Yes.

**Sue:** Okay, as part of Marine Corps Air Wing ground crew and you say you were discharged almost immediately after the atom bomb dropped.

**Gil:** Yes.

**Sue:** Came home married, started a new life. So you were in that wave of men who came back and had to find a job right away and start a life. What kind of job did you have – you say here minor jobs but what did you do right after the war when you came back?

**Gil:** Oh, I wasn't educated.

**Sue:** As in –

**Gil:** As in after I was discharged.

**Sue:** Did you have a high school graduation?

**Gil:** Yes, I did.

**Sue:** Okay

**Gil:** But my real, my real, learning took place after the war. I went to school for a little while under the G.I. bill that for some reason hit a snag and I wasn't carried along far enough to get through on my own. I didn't start my undergraduate work in George Washington I started it – I was still up in New York in Albany. And I went to school up there and I carried credits down. But every time you travel with credits and you get to the end and you want to pick up on them you don't get as much credit as you carry in the door. But it worked out.

**Sue:** I understand that.

**Gil:** Yeah.

**Sue:** But you got your Master's Degree in education at age forth and after you retired from the FAA you went to teach electronics at Northern Virginia Community College.

**Gil:** Um hum.

**Sue:** Tell us a little about that; did you like doing that?

**Gil:** I earned a second degree thinking that at some point in time I would want to teach. And I thought that getting a degree in education would be of some help in finding my way into that. It turned out it didn't. Um when I was looking for a teaching job after I had retired for the third time no it was not the third time it was the second time.

**Sue:** Second time.

**Gil:** I thought it was going to be a fairly straight forward matter. I was teaching part time at NOVA and I thought I had an open door there or had a doorway that wouldn't be too hard to get through. It turns out that I was teaching math and some science courses at the time and a job came up, a permanent job came up in math. I applied for it and to my surprise and dismay I didn't have a beggar's chance because for a math major – I wasn't a math major although I knew a lot of math and taught math – math major's applied in the scores for that position and they had degrees in math. And so I was really cut out of the competition. Later on my education degree didn't help me at all. But later on an opening developed

in electronics and when I applied for that one there was hardly anybody else trying to get in – strangely. And there an undergraduate degree was good as gold. So it fooled me but it worked out fine.

**Sue:** And you did that for a while and then went again to provide contract support to the FAA say International Standards Aircraft Guidance equipment.

**Gil:** Yeah.

**Sue:** That sounds hard, it sounds

**Gil:** Well I worked at, years ago at, JFK at that time it was Idlewild and then I transferred to this area and ah, carried my expertise into the headquarters offices. But the work that I did was in Albany when I first cut into it was maintaining the equipment that airplanes use to land safely and to travel to from place to another. We call those things landing aides and route aides. So I maintained the equipment on the airport proper. And I guess and then when I moved up to Albany I went up there as a supervisor in the same job. And I finally heard that there was an opening in Washington for engineers who were skilled in electronics and since this was the headquarters office I thought it might be a good way to advance myself.

When I came here I went into an office which wasn't too much to my liking but that's the way jobs progress sometimes. You work at the thing you like and love and to get promoted you get further and further away from hands on and more and more into paper work.

**Sue:** Do you fly? Do you fly much, do you like to?

**Gil:** I don't fly the plane.

**Sue:** No, but I meant as in a passenger.

**Gil:** Yeah, I've flown all over the world.

**Sue:** Are you, do you feel that you know more than other people who might be sitting next to you about flying because of your background? And is that fun

when you fly – most people don't find it a real pleasant experience when they fly today and that's why I'm asking.

Laughing.

**Gil:** I go to sleep on airplanes.

**Sue:** You don't care – you just trust – okay. What have you learned about this area about Providence District that you would tell someone else looking for a place to live? What's the good thing about being here what would you say if somebody said I'm just thinking about Fairfax County and your neighborhood? What would you tell them? Good and bad.

**Gil:** A lot of stimulation, great educational opportunities, great place to raise children, ah expensive.

**Sue:** That's the down side.

Both laughing.

**Sue:** But you would still tell them that this is one of the best places to be.

**Gil:** Yeah, I really think it is.

**Sue:** And you've lived in New York City so ---ha ha ha.

**Gil:** Almost.

**Sue:** So you've had the big city experience.

**Gil:** Almost out of it.

**Sue:** Almost out of it.

**Gil:** New York City, in the Northern end of New York City the last subway stop is at two hundred and forty First Street and we lived on two hundred and fortieth street. You couldn't go too much further without going out of the city. So which made it a little more country like in those days but it's not very

**Sue:** Country like there now (laughing). Do you miss some of the country atmosphere that used to be here in Providence in Fairfax? I mean Centerville use to be way out in the middle of nowhere that's all built up now at Rte 50 and Rte 28.

**Gil:** I can't say I enjoy the buildup; it's getting to be a little too crowded especially on the roads. I take, I still take a couple of art classes. I take one of them in Lyons Village I guess it is in Arlington. So I drive down there twice a month and I've got a couple of choices: I can go down Lee Highway all the way – that's a rough road though. Or I can take I66 which is not always so great either.

**Sue:** Do you ever use public transportation?

**Gil:** Not anymore. I use to use it years ago when I went to school I took a bus from home to downtown Washington. Or I took a bus to work. I went to school at night; virtually all my schooling was at night.

**Sue:** In addition to working fulltime.

**Gil:** Yeah. So when I was taking classes at G.W. and I was working downtown not too far away I'd say maybe a mile and a half away. I would walk back and forth. It didn't seem like it was very much of a walk but I had plenty of time between being off duty at work and getting to school on time.

**Sue:** But you still drive.

**Gil:** I still drive.

**Sue:** And if you didn't drive do you feel transportation options are somewhat limited here? Do you have neighbors you could depend on to help you out?

**Gil:** Well yes I guess so but I'd probably abandoned at some point, I don't know when that will be but I would abandon the use of the car for routine things like going to class especially in winter. It's a struggle, it won't be so bad I guess when they get the construction work over with but right now I feel like it's worth my life to get through that.

**Sue:** That's an interesting observation.

**Gil:** Apparently the people who go through that routine everyday are so familiar with the saw horses and signs.

**Sue:** You're talking about the construction around the major beltway and Gallows Road that area.

**Gil:** Yeah.

**Sue:** Okay.

**Gil:** And the intersection of the beltway and I66. Now, frankly the other day, I was down there Tuesday and I went through that area and you never can be sure you are going to see the same thing in a few days or two weeks that you saw, see I only do that every couple of weeks. And the other drivers it seems to me must go through it every day because they seem to know where the road is even when you can't see it.

**Linda:** That's true we've heard a lot of that.

**Gil:** And you shoot through there it's worth your life.

**Linda:** Yeah, with the Hot Lanes Project that's going on right now it's changing like you say weekly possibly daily in some instances.

**Sue:** So if there were something you would change in this area would it be the maybe related to the traffic options?

**Gil:** I don't know a good answer to that because I'm out of the loop much of the time. I don't have to get on the road unless I have to go see the doctor or take a class or something like that. And I avoid, I'm beginning to avoid night time driving especially if the weather's not good. About, about a year ago I came through, I was out and came back, I couldn't even tell you the route now but I came back through a construction area where there were saw horses piled up and signs which warned don't go here go there. Lights that were on to help but I don't know if they helped or hurt because and it was raining. And you had a combination of head lights, obstruction lighting that was up and supposedly to

help you, reflections off of the wet streets and it was really – I don't think I could ever get my wife out again on a night like that.

**Sue:** Let me ask you about your wife Virginia; she knits things. Tell me a little about her.

**Gil:** Okay, um, well we married right after the war. I was courting her by correspondence and when I got home after the war we just picked a date and got married.

**Sue:** A lot of people did.

**Gil:** Yeah.

**Sue:** When they, you were in that big mass of people that came back after the war and people did just those things.

**Gil:** Funny, we think back on that we didn't have a penny to – when we decided to get married and we wanted to hold a reception somewhere we went to a local tavern that rented us the place for the one afternoon and evening and my wife to be and maid of honor to be went up there and decorated the place themselves. And it was very much not at all like; you wouldn't plan one like that today. But we had no means at that time.

**Sue:** But it worked.

**Gil:** It worked.

**Sue:** How long have you been married?

**Gil:** Sixty four years.

**Sue:** So you don't need money to

**Gil:** Yeah.

**Sue:** Good. Is there anything you want to add and tell me that we didn't talk about? What do you want to be remembered for on this website; we have your memories of things here, your contributions to the community.

**Gil:** It isn't really going to mean much to other people is it.

**Sue:** It sounds like it means a lot to your neighbors.

**Gil:** Yeah, (softly) yeah.

**Sue:** Thank you very much then.

**Gil:** I don't know that I can add much to that anyway.

**Sue:** Okay thanks.